











**PREMATURE**





**DEATH**





**DEMOCRACY, DISPOSABILITY,  
AND THE FLINT WATER CRISIS**

*The Third Coast Conspiracy* ..... 11

**FROM WE CHARGE GENOCIDE**

*Civil Rights Congress* ..... 29

**THE CHALLENGE OF AUTOMATION**

*James Boggs* ..... 59

**THE WORRYING STATE OF THE  
ANTI-PRISON MOVEMENT**

*Ruth Wilson Gilmore* ..... 83





**DEMOCRACY, DISPOSABILITY,  
AND THE FLINT WATER CRISIS**

*The Third Coast Conspiracy* 2016



After more or less staying under the radar for over a year, in the last few weeks the water crisis in Flint has become national news. The overall story is pretty clear. Back in April 2014, the city stopped getting its water from the system that serves the Detroit metropolitan area, which it had been doing since 1967, and switched over to the Flint River instead. Residents immediately noticed the difference, complaining about the water's taste, smell, and color. City and state officials ignored or dismissed them, insisting that the water was safe—and trying to hide all evidence to the contrary. In fact, the corrosive river water had caused lead in the city's aging pipes to leach into the water supply. A year and a half after switching to the Flint River, the proportion of children with

above-average levels of lead in their blood had doubled. All of the children in Flint now have to be treated for lead exposure. In the same period, an abrupt spike in a rare, waterborne illness called Legionnaire's Disease caused 87 infections and at least ten deaths. Late last week, Governor Rick Snyder finally declared a state of emergency and requested federal aid.

The main framework that's been used on the left to understand and analyze the Flint water crisis is something like the "shock doctrine," which foregrounds democracy (or the lack thereof) as the key analytical category for explaining what went wrong. This phrase was coined by the activist and writer Naomi Klein in her 2007 book of the same name to refer to the techniques used by neoliberal politicians to implement austerity policies.<sup>1</sup> Since these measures are so unpopular, Klein argued, they can't be put in place through normal, democratic means. Instead, opportunistic politicians take advantage of situations of emergency, when the public is distracted and no

alternatives are readily available, to force them through without contestation. One of Klein's best examples is the package of sweeping education reforms imposed in New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, which basically privatized the city's public schools overnight.

Today, Michigan is probably the state where the shock doctrine framework is most applicable. For more than a decade now, Michigan governors have been appointing so-called "emergency managers" to run school districts and cities for which a "state of financial emergency" has been declared. These unelected administrators rule by fiat—they can override local elected officials, break union contracts, sell off public assets, and privatize public functions at will. It's not incidental that the majority of the people who have lived under emergency management are black.<sup>2</sup> Flint, whose population was 55.6% black as of the 2010 census (in a state whose population is 14.2% black overall), was under emergency manage-

ment from December 2011 to April 2015. As noted above, it was during that period that the decision was made to stop purchasing water from Detroit and start drawing water directly from the Flint River.

Much of the commentary on the situation in Flint has focused on the emergency manager, and from this perspective the water crisis looks like a struggle on the terrain of electoral politics. Liberals tend to see the problem as rooted in Governor Snyder's decision to appoint Flint's emergency managers, which suggests that it is the Republicans and their right-wing, corporate sponsors who are ultimately responsible for what happened. In making this claim, however, they forget that Michigan Democrats have also appointed emergency managers.<sup>3</sup> In any case, it's harder than it seems to identify the responsible party here. It was one of Flint's emergency managers who eventually made the decision to tap the Flint River, but it was only after the city's elected officials took the first key step, with the city council initially ap-



proving the switch away from Detroit in an overwhelming 7–1 vote back in March 2013. At a June 2013 meeting that included Flint city officials, representatives from the Genesee County Drain Commission, and the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, the determination was made that the Flint River would be “more difficult to treat” but was nevertheless a “viable” source.<sup>4</sup> Officials at multiple levels of government (city, county, and state) and across multiple jurisdictions played a role. The amount of ink that’s been spilled trying to figure out who’s responsible underscores the diffuse character of the structures of governance through which these decisions are made.<sup>5</sup>

More importantly, what’s missing from this line of analysis is an acknowledgment of the structural shift in the global economy beginning in the 1960s and intensifying over the decades that followed. This brings us to a second approach to what’s happening in Flint, which frames the crisis through the lens of

“disposability.” The deindustrialization of manufacturing cities like Flint and Detroit—first with suburbanization, relocating factories to segregated white suburbs, then with offshoring, relocating factories to other regions of the global economy—has had material impacts that are relatively insulated from political decision-making, especially at the city level. In Flint, observes historian Andrew Highsmith in his recent book *Demolition Means Progress*, GM’s workforce declined from more than 80,000 in 1955 to less than 8,000 by 2009.<sup>6</sup> As production was relocated and productivity increased, sectors of the working class have been rendered permanently superfluous to the needs of capital, and are expelled from the labor process, waged employment, and, increasingly, from what remains of the welfare state.

The result is a growing surplus population for which the state must deploy new forms of control. This has led, most obviously, to the massive expansion of the policing and incarceration apparatus

since the 1970s. The state of Michigan, for example, now has over 50,000 people incarcerated (31 percent higher than the Midwest average) and spends \$2 billion a year, which breaks down to \$5 million a day, on “corrections.”<sup>7</sup> But a second process, which has received significantly less attention, has also occurred in parallel to this one: efforts to remove, withhold, and control infrastructural systems and services—like education, health, and, of course, water—that are necessary for communities to be able to reproduce themselves. In a recent article, Jon Cramer and Rada Katsarova analyze this second mechanism in the context of the battle over the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department:

In the last decade, especially after the 2008 financial crisis, the urban centers of the Midwest such as Chicago and Detroit, but also in the Northeast, such as Baltimore and Philadelphia, have developed a new dynamic: the use of the state (in the form of local or

regional governments) to transfer infrastructural resources and their control out of or away from marginalized urban populations, which are predominantly black, brown, and immigrant. These infrastructures range from health and educational resources to natural and civic resources such as water and sewage systems. There has been a tendency to read these battles around infrastructure as just another round of neoliberalism—another example of the “shrinking state.” Such an approach, however, seems unable to grasp how these infrastructural grabs, rather than a consequence of the state shrinking, are in fact a distinct kind of raced and classed resource transfer mobilized and sanctioned by the state. Nowhere is this clearer than in Detroit, where the predominantly white suburbs succeeded under the cover of Detroit’s 2013–14 bankruptcy proceedings to pry the possession of the water and sewage infrastructure away from the city proper. Not only have the mostly African-American residents of the

city lost control of these infrastructures, they now have to subsidize the social reproduction of the predominantly white, wealthier Detroit suburbs.<sup>8</sup>

Local, regional, and state governments are removing the basic, infrastructural supports that are necessary for the reproduction of life. As a consequence, residents of cities like Flint and Detroit, in particular black and immigrant populations, have been subjected to increasing vulnerability in such forms as declining life expectancy and appalling infant mortality. “Disposability” and “surplus population” sound like abstract concepts, but they’re a tangible reality for folks on the ground in Flint. “We’re like disposable people here,” one resident told the *Toronto Star* the other day. “We’re not even human here, I guess.”<sup>9</sup>

These disposable populations are raced. The geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore has defined racism as “the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to

premature death.”<sup>10</sup> What racism names, in other words, is not bias, prejudice, or discrimination, but the systems that orchestrate how resources are siphoned away from some populations and redirected toward others. These systems do more than just define which lives matter and which lives don’t—they materially make some lives matter by killing others more. When a Flint resident tells the *Detroit Free Press* that “we get treated like we don’t matter,” the message is clear that to not matter is to slowly be killed.<sup>11</sup>

Most of the time, slow death is hard to see. In individual cases, it can be difficult to perceive the gap between a death that comes at the “right” time and one that comes “too soon.” Disposable populations usually die gradually, with years quietly shaved off their life expectancies through such “accidents” as heart attacks, diabetes complications, and asthma. What is different about the water crisis in Flint is that

slow death has suddenly become visible, traceable back to a single cause: the water.

The appropriation of infrastructures and services is, then, the right-hand of the carceral system: a means of disciplining disposable populations by inflicting slow deaths upon them. But this process is not new. It is relatively continuous with the long historical trajectory of what appears from this vantage point as a form of race war, by which white communities withdrew material support from and indeed plundered black communities, barricading themselves into suburban lives through segregation and policing and insulating these lives with resource transfers from the increasingly black population trapped within the city limits.

To give a specific example, Highsmith shows that the suburbanization of Flint's manufacturing, and the corresponding withdrawal of tax dollars, was already getting underway by the 1950s. As companies like GM

increasingly decentralized production, taking advantage of tax benefits at local and federal levels, they also sought out and acquired infrastructural supports from the municipality. "In order to operate their facilities," he writes, "business managers from GM and other firms required sewers, large quantities of water, and other services that were often unavailable in suburbs and rural areas. Representatives from GM thus aggressively lobbied Flint's city commissioners to extend water and sewer lines to their new suburban plants. By the close of the 1950s, their efforts had resulted in new water and sewer hookups for at least seven of GM's suburban plants." The city of Flint also subsidized suburban production through a stratified rate structure for water customers. Residential customers living within the city limits paid a relatively higher rate for smaller quantities of water (32 cents per hundred cubic feet of water up to 10,500 cubic feet), while industrial customers at suburban plants paid relatively lower rates for significantly larger



quantities (20 cents per hundred cubic feet in excess of 105,000 cubic feet). “This policy, which rewarded the largest consumers of water with significantly lower rates, amounted to a large subsidy for local manufacturers,” one that was paid for by city residents, a population that was increasingly black.<sup>12</sup> (More recently, one of the early signs of the magnitude of the water crisis in Flint was GM’s decision in October 2014 to stop using the city’s water at its engine plant due to concerns about corrosion. Unfortunately, what might have served as a warning about the water’s health consequences on city residents was ignored.<sup>13</sup>)

The Flint water crisis is best seen as continuous with these histories of expropriation, rather than sharply differentiated from them by new political instruments like emergency management. In this sense, the “shock doctrine” framework misses something critical about the situation in Flint. Because it emphasizes the lack of democracy, this approach

tends to foreground either the responsibility of individual politicians—the governor, the emergency manager, the head of the state’s environmental quality department—or, more helpfully, the emergency manager law as a whole. This is an important part of the story, and we’re all for getting rid of them. But the exit of any or all of these political figures, and even the elimination of emergency management, will not change the fact that racialized surplus populations will continue to inhabit cities like Flint, and that states will continue to manage and discipline them in one way or another. By foregrounding the concept of “disposability,” we are interested in thinking about what it would take to reproduce communities, or for communities to reproduce themselves, without relying on capital and the state, to create autonomous infrastructures of social reproduction that do not continuously subject black, immigrant, and marginalized white populations to premature death.

## NOTES

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FROM **WE CHARGE GENOCIDE**

*Civil Rights Congress* **1951**



Out of the inhuman black ghettos of American cities, out of the cotton plantations of the South, comes this record of mass slayings on the basis of race, of lives deliberately warped and distorted by the willful creation of conditions making for premature death, poverty and disease. It is a record that calls aloud for condemnation, for an end to these terrible injustices that constitute a daily and ever-increasing violation of the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

It is sometimes incorrectly thought that genocide means the complete and definitive destruction of a race or people. The Genocide Convention, however, adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on December 9, 1948, defines genocide as any killings on the basis of race, or, in its specific words,

as “killing members of the group.” Any intent to destroy, *in whole or in part*, a national, racial, ethnic or religious group is genocide, according to the Convention. Thus, the Convention states, “causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group” is genocide as well as “killing members of the group.”

We maintain, therefore, that the oppressed Negro citizens of the United States, segregated, discriminated against and long the target of violence, suffer from genocide as the result of the consistent, conscious, unified policies of every branch of government.

The Civil Rights Congress has prepared and submits this petition to the General Assembly of the United Nations on behalf of the Negro people in the interest of peace and democracy, charging the Government of the United States of America with violation of the Charter of the United Nations and the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.



We believe that in issuing this document we are discharging an historic responsibility to the American people, as well as rendering a service of inestimable value to progressive mankind. We speak of the American people because millions of white Americans in the ranks of labor and the middle class, and particularly those who live in the southern states and are often contemptuously called poor whites, are themselves suffering to an ever-greater degree from the consequences of the Jim Crow segregation policy of government in its relations with Negro citizens. We speak of progressive mankind because a policy of discrimination at home must inevitably create racist commodities for export abroad—must inevitably tend toward war.

We have not dealt here with the cruel and inhuman policy of this government toward the people of Puerto Rico. Impoverished and reduced to a semi-literate state through the wanton exploitation and oppression by gigantic American concerns, through the

merciless frame-up and imprisonment of hundred of its sons and daughters, this colony of the rulers of the United States reveals in all its stark nakedness the moral bankruptcy of this government and those who control its home and foreign policies.

History has shown that the racist theory of government of the USA is not the private affair of Americans, but the concern of mankind everywhere.

It is our hope, and we fervently believe that it was the hope and aspiration of every black American whose voice was silenced forever through premature death at the hands of racist-minded hooligans or Klan terrorists, that the truth recorded here will be made known to the world; that it will speak with a tongue of fire loosing an unquenchable moral crusade, the universal response to which will sound the death knell of all racist theories.

We have scrupulously kept within the purview of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, which is held to embrace

those “acts committed with intent to destroy in whole or in part a national, ethical, racial or religious group as such.”

We particularly pray for the most careful reading of this material by those who have always regarded genocide as a term to be used only where the acts of terror evinced an intent to destroy a whole nation. We further submit that this Convention on Genocide is, by virtue of our avowed acceptance of the Covenant of the United Nations, an inseparable part of the law of the United States of America.

According to international law, and according to our own law, the Genocide Convention, as well as the provisions of the United Nations Charter, supersedes, negates and displaces all discriminatory racist law on the books of the United States and the several states.

The Hitler crimes, of awful magnitude, beginning as they did against the heroic Jewish people, finally drenched the world in blood, and left a record of

maimed and tortured bodies, and devastated areas such as mankind had never seen before. Justice Robert H. Jackson, who now sits upon the United States Supreme Court bench, described this holocaust to the world in the powerful language with which he opened the Nuremberg trials of the Nazi leaders. Every word he voiced against the monstrous Nazi beast applies with equal weight, we believe, to those who are guilty of the crimes herein set forth.

Here we present the documented crimes of federal, state and municipal governments in the United States of America, the dominant nation in the United Nations, against 15,000,000 of its own nationals—the Negro people of the United States. These crimes are of the gravest concern to mankind. The General Assembly of the United Nations, by reason of the United Nations Charter and the Genocide Convention, itself is invested with power to receive this indictment and act on it.

The proof of this fact is its action upon the similar

complaint of the Government of India against South Africa.

We call upon the United Nations to act and to call the government of the United States to account.

We believe that the test of the basic goals of a foreign policy is inherent in the manner in which a government treats its own nationals and is not to be found in the lofty platitudes that pervade so many treaties or constitutions. The essence lies not in the form, but rather, in the substance.

The Civil Rights Congress is a defender of constitutional liberties, human rights, and of peace. It is the implacable enemy of every creed, philosophy, social system or way of life that denies democratic rights or one iota of human dignity to any human being because of color, creed, nationality or political belief.

We ask all men and women of good will to unite to realize the objective set forth in the summary and prayer concluding this petition. We believe that this program can go far toward ending the threat of a

third world war. We believe it can contribute to the establishment of a people's democracy on a universal scale.

But may we add as a final note that the Negro people desire equality of opportunity in this land where their contributions to the economic, political and social developments have been of splendid proportions, and in quality second to none. They will accept nothing less, and continued efforts to force them into the category of second-class citizens through force and violence, through segregation, racist law and an institutionalized oppression, can only end in disaster for those responsible.

Respectfully submitted by the Civil Rights Congress as a service to the peoples of the world, and particularly to the lovers of peace and democracy in the United States of America.

**WILLIAM L. PATTERSON**

National Executive Secretary, Civil Rights Congress

**TO THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY  
OF THE UNITED NATIONS**

The responsibility of being the first in history to charge the government of the United States of America with the crime of genocide is not one your petitioners take lightly. The responsibility is particularly grave when citizens must charge their own government with mass murder of its own nationals, with institutionalized oppression and persistent slaughter of the Negro people in the United States on a basis of "race," a crime abhorred by mankind and prohibited by the conscience of the world as expressed in the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on December 9, 1948.

**GENOCIDE LEADS TO FASCISM AND TO WAR**

If our duty is unpleasant it is historically necessary both for the welfare of the American people and for

the peace of the world. We petition as American patriots, sufficiently anxious to save our countrymen and all mankind from the horrors of war to shoulder a task as painful as it is important. We cannot forget Hitler's demonstration that genocide at home can become wider massacre abroad, that domestic genocide develops into the larger genocide that is predatory war. The wrongs of which we complain are so much the expression of predatory American reaction and its government that civilization cannot ignore them nor risk their continuance without courting its own destruction. We agree with those members of the General Assembly who declared that genocide is a matter of world concern because its practice imperils world safety.

But if the responsibility of your petitioners is great, it is dwarfed by the responsibility of those guilty of the crime we charge. Seldom in human annals has so iniquitous a conspiracy been so gilded with the trappings of respectability. Seldom has



mass murder on the score of "race" been so sanctified by law, so justified by those who demand free elections abroad even as they kill their fellow citizens who demand free elections at home. Never have so many individuals been so ruthlessly destroyed amid many tributes to the sacredness of the individual. The distinctive trait of this genocide is a cant that mouths aphorisms of Anglo-Saxon jurisprudence even as it kills.

The genocide of which we complain is as much a fact as gravity. The whole world knows of it. The proof is in every day's newspapers, in everyone's sight and hearing in these United States. In one form or another it has been practiced for more than three hundred years, although never with such sinister implications for the welfare and peace of the world as at present. Its very familiarity disguises its horror. It is a crime so embedded in law, so explained away by specious rationale, so hidden by talk of liberty, that even the conscience of the tenderminded is some-

times dulled. Yet the conscience of mankind cannot be beguiled from its duty by the pious phrases and the deadly legal euphemisms with which its perpetrators seek to transform their guilt into high moral purpose.

#### KILLING MEMBERS OF THE GROUP

Your petitioners will prove that the crime of which we complain is in fact genocide within the terms and meaning of the United Nations Convention providing for the prevention and punishment of this crime. We shall submit evidence, tragically voluminous, of “acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethical, racial or religious group as such”—in this case the 15,000,000 Negro people of the United States.

We shall submit evidence proving “killing members of the group,” in violation of Article II of the Con-

vention. We cite killings by police, killings by incited gangs, killings at night by masked men, killings always on the basis of "race," killings by the Ku Klux Klan, that organization which is chartered by several states as a semi-official arm of government and even granted the tax exemptions of a benevolent society.

Our evidence concerns the thousands of Negroes who over the years have been beaten to death on chain gangs and in the back rooms of sheriff's offices, in the cells of county jails, in precinct police stations and on city streets, who have been framed and murdered by sham legal forms and by a legal bureaucracy. It concerns those Negroes who have been killed, allegedly for failure to say "sir" or tip their hats or move aside quickly enough, or, more often, on trumped up charges of "rape," but in reality for trying to vote or otherwise demanding the legal and inalienable rights and privileges of United States citizenship formally guaranteed them by the Constitution of the

United States, rights denied them on the basis of “race,” in violation of the Constitution of the United States, the United Nations Charter, and the Genocide Convention.

#### ECONOMIC GENOCIDE

We shall offer proof of economic genocide, or in the words of the Convention, proof of “deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its destruction in whole or in part.” We shall prove that such conditions so swell the infant and maternal death rate and the death rate from disease, that the American Negro is deprived, when compared with the remainder of the population of the United States, of eight years of life on the average.

Further we shall show a deliberate national oppression of these 15,000,000 Negro Americans on the basis of “race” to perpetuate these “conditions of

life." Negroes are the last hired and the first fired. They are forced into city ghettos or their rural equivalents. They are segregated legally or through sanctioned violence into filthy, disease-bearing housing, and deprived by law of adequate medical care and education. From birth to death, Negro Americans are humiliated and persecuted, in violation of the Charter and Convention. They are forced by threat of violence and imprisonment into inferior, segregated accommodations, into jim crow busses, jim crow trains, jim crow hospitals, jim crow schools, jim crow theaters, jim crow restaurants, jim crow housing, and finally into jim crow cemeteries.

We shall prove that the object of this genocide, as of all genocide, is the perpetuation of economic and political power by the few through the destruction of political protest by the many. Its method is to demoralize and divide an entire nation; its end is to increase the profits and unchallenged control by a reactionary

clique. We shall show that those responsible for this crime are not the humble but the so-called great, not the American people but their misleaders, not the convict but the robed judge, not the criminal but the police, not the spontaneous mob but organized terrorists licensed and approved by the state to incite to a Roman holiday.

We shall offer evidence that this genocide is not plotted in the dark but incited over the radio into the ears of millions, urged in the glare of public forums by Senators and Governors. It is offered as an article of faith by powerful political organizations, such as the Dixiecrats, and defended by influential newspapers, all in violation of the United Nations charter and the Convention forbidding genocide.

This proof does not come from the enemies of the white supremacists but from their own mouths, their own writings, their political resolutions, their racist laws, and from photographs of their handiwork. Neither Hitler nor Goebbels wrote obscurantist racial

incitements more voluminously or viciously than do their American counterparts, nor did such incitements circulate in Nazi mails any more than they do in the mails of the United States.

#### CONSPIRACY TO GENOCIDE

Through this and other evidence we shall prove this crime of genocide is the result of a massive conspiracy, more deadly in that it is sometimes "understood" rather than expressed, a part of the mores of the ruling class often concealed by euphemisms, but always directed to oppressing the Negro people. Its members are so well-drilled, so rehearsed over the generations, that they can carry out their parts automatically and with a minimum of spoken direction. They have inherited their plot and their business is but to implement it daily so that it works daily. This implementation is sufficiently expressed in decision and statute, in depressed wages, in robbing millions of

the vote and millions more of the land, and in countless other political and economic facts, as to reveal definitively the existence of a conspiracy backed by reactionary interests in which are meshed all the organs of the Executive, Legislative and Judicial branches of government. It is manifest that a people cannot be consistently killed over the years on the basis of "race"—and more than 10,000 Negroes have so suffered death—cannot be uniformly segregated, despoiled, impoverished, and denied equal protection before the law, unless it is the result of the deliberate, all-pervasive policy of government and those who control it.

#### EMASCULATION OF DEMOCRACY

We shall show, more particularly, how terror, how "killing members of the group," in violation of Article II of the Genocide Convention, has been used to prevent the Negro people from voting in huge and deci-



sive areas of the United States in which they are the preponderant population, thus dividing the whole American people, emasculating mass movements for democracy and securing the grip of predatory reaction on the federal, state, county and city governments. We shall prove that the crimes of genocide offered for your action and the world's attention have in fact been incited, a punishable crime under Article III of the Convention, often by such officials as Governors, Senators, Judges and peace officers whose phrases about white supremacy, and the necessity of maintaining inviolate a white electorate, resulted in bloodshed as surely as more direct incitement.

We shall submit evidence showing the existence of a mass of American law, written as was Hitler's law solely on the basis of "race," providing for segregation and otherwise penalizing the Negro people, in violation not only of Articles II and III of the Convention but also in violation of the Charter of the United Nations. Finally, we shall offer proof that a conspir-

acy exists in which the Government of the United States, its Supreme Court, its Congress, its Executive branch, as well as the various state, county and municipal governments, consciously effectuate policies which result in the crime of genocide being consistently and constantly practiced against the Negro people of the United States.

#### THE NEGRO PETITIONERS

Many of your petitioners are Negro citizens to whom the charges herein described are not mere words. They are facts felt on our bodies, crimes inflicted on our dignity. We struggle for deliverance, not without pride in our valor, but we warn mankind that our fate is theirs. We solemnly declare that continuance of this American crime against the Negro people of the United States will strengthen those reactionary American forces driving towards World War III as certainly as the unrebuked Nazi genocide against the

Jewish people strengthened Hitler in his successful drive to World War II.

We, Negro petitioners whose communities have been laid waste, whose homes have been burned and looted, whose children have been killed, whose women have been raped, have noted with peculiar horror that the genocidal doctrines and actions of the American white supremacists have already been exported to the colored peoples of Asia. We solemnly warn that a nation which practices genocide against its own nationals may not be long deterred, if it has the power, from genocide elsewhere. White supremacy at home makes for colored massacres abroad. Both reveal contempt for human life in a colored skin. Jellied gasoline in Korea and the lynchers' faggot at home are connected in more ways than that both result in death by fire. The lyncher and the atom bomber are related. The first cannot murder unpunished and unrebuked without so encouraging the latter that the peace of the world and the lives of mil-

lions are endangered. Nor is this metaphysics. The tie binding both is economic profit and political control. It was not without significance that it was President Truman who spoke of the possibility of using the atom bomb on the colored peoples of Asia, that it is American statesmen who prate constantly of "Asiatic hordes."

**"OUR HUMANITY DENIED AND MOCKED"**

We Negro petitioners protest this genocide as Negroes and we protest it as Americans, as patriots. We know that no American can be truly free while 15,000,000 other Americans are persecuted on the grounds of "race," that few Americans can be prosperous while 15,000,000 are deliberately pauperized. Our country can never know true democracy while millions of its citizens are denied the vote on the basis of their color.

But above all we protest this genocide as human

beings whose very humanity is denied and mocked. We cannot forget that after Congressman Henderson Lovelace Lanham, of Rome, Georgia, speaking in the halls of Congress, called William L. Patterson, one of the leaders of the Negro people, "a God-damned black son-of-a-bitch," he added, "We gotta keep the black apes down." We cannot forget it because this is the animating sentiment of the white supremacists, of a powerful segment of American life. We cannot forget that in many American states it is a crime for a white person to marry a Negro on the racist theory that Negroes are "inherently inferior as an immutable fact of Nature." The whole institution of segregation, which is training for killing, education for genocide, is based on the Hitler-like theory of the "inherent inferiority of the Negro." The tragic fact of segregation is the basis for the statement, too often heard after murder, particularly in the South, "Why, I think no more of killing a n——r than of killing a dog."

We petition in the first instance because we are

compelled to speak by the unending slaughter of Negroes. The fact of our ethnic origin, of which we are proud—our ancestors were building the world's first civilizations 3,000 years before our oppressors emerged from barbarism in the forests of western Europe—is daily made the signal for segregation and murder. There is infinite variety in the cruelty we will catalogue, but each case has the common denominator of racism. This opening statement is not the place to present our evidence in detail. Still, in this summary of what is to be proved, we believe it necessary to show something of the crux of our case, something of the pattern of genocidal murder, the technique of incitement to genocide, and the methods of mass terror.

Our evidence begins with 1945 and continues to the present. It gains in deadliness and in number of cases almost in direct ratio to the surge towards war. We are compelled to hold to this six-year span if this document is to be brought into manageable proportions.

## THE EVIDENCE

There was a time when racist violence had its center in the South. But as the Negro people spread to the north, east and west seeking to escape the southern hell, the violence, impelled in the first instance by economic motives, followed them, its cause also economic. Once most of the violence against Negroes occurred in the countryside, but that was before the Negro emigrations of the twenties and thirties. Now there is not a great American city from New York to Cleveland or Detroit, from Washington, the nation's capital, to Chicago, from Memphis to Atlanta or Birmingham, from New Orleans to Los Angeles, that is not disgraced by the wanton killing of innocent Negroes. It is no longer a sectional phenomenon.

Once the classic method of lynching was the rope. Now it is the policeman's bullet. To many an American the police are the government, certainly its most visible representative. We submit that the evidence sug-

gests that the killing of Negroes has become police policy in the United States and that police policy is the most practical expression of government policy.

Our evidence is admittedly incomplete. It is our hope that the United Nations will complete it. Much of the evidence, particularly of violence, was gained from the files of Negro newspapers, from the labor press, from the annual reports of Negro societies and established Negro yearbooks. A list is appended.

But by far the majority of Negro murders are never recorded, never known except to the perpetrators and the bereaved survivors of the victim. Negro men and women leave their homes and are never seen alive again. Sometimes weeks later their bodies, or bodies thought to be theirs and often horribly mutilated, are found in the woods or washed up on the shore of a river or lake. This is a well-known pattern of American culture. In many sections of the country police do not even bother to record the murder of Negroes. Most white newspapers have a policy



of not publishing anything concerning murders of Negroes or assaults upon them. These unrecorded deaths are the rule rather than the exception—thus our evidence, though voluminous, is scanty when compared to the actuality.

FROM *We Charge Genocide: The Crime of  
Government Against the Negro People*



A black and white photograph showing the lower bodies and legs of several people in a state of poverty. One person in the foreground is wearing a tattered, patched-up pair of trousers. Another person is wearing a dark, heavy jacket and trousers. The ground is dirt and littered with debris. A white rectangular text box is overlaid on the top half of the image.

THE CHALLENGE OF AUTOMATION

*James Boggs* 1963



Since 1955 and the advent of automation, overtime has been detrimental to the workers. Again and again workers have been faced with the decision to work overtime or not to work overtime, and the decision has usually been: "To hell with those out of work. Let's get the dollar while the dollar is gettable." The amazing thing is that this has nothing to do with the backwardness of these workers. Not only can they run production and think for themselves, but they sense and feel the changes in conditions way in advance of those who are supposed to be responsible for their welfare. But with all these abilities there is one big organic weakness. Over and over again workers in various shops and industries, faced with a critical issue, only divide and become disunited, even

though they are well aware that they are being unprincipled and weakening their own cause as workers. Since the advent of automation there has not been any serious sentiment for striking, particularly if the strike was going to come at the expense of material things that the workers already had in their possession, like cars, refrigerators, TV sets, etc. They were not ready to make any serious sacrifices of these; they would rather sacrifice the issue. Between the personal things and the issue, they have chosen the personal. Most American workers have geared themselves to a standard of living that is based on a five-day week plus—either in the form of overtime or another job, part or full time. And any time this standard of living is threatened, it is a personal crisis, which means that more and more decisions are being personalized and individualized rather than collectivized and socialized.

What then happens to the class struggle? At this point the class consciousness of the workers tends to

shift from what has traditionally been considered its main quality, hostility to the class enemy outside, and to focus on antagonisms, struggles, conflicts among the workers themselves. Fights among the workers begin to sharpen, although they no longer take the form they did in the 30's when the workers were divided by race and nationality prejudices ("Dagoes," "Wops," "Polacks," "Niggers," "Buffaloes," etc.). The division is now between two groupings. On one side are the brown-noses, stooges, and workers who are only looking out for themselves, those who are complacent because of the fringe benefits they assume they have won through the union, particularly those near to retirement, and those who would revolt but are afraid of the union bureaucracy or of being fired and then forgotten or branded as "nuisances" and "troublemakers." On the other side are those who emphasize issues, who raise a cry about rights, who call upon workers to make decisions on principles and issues. Among the latter are the unemployed

who picketed the union for agreeing to overtime work and who continue to picket the plants against overtime even at the risk of being considered nuisances and troublemakers by those inside the shop, showing that the only ones who are seriously concerned about unemployment today are the unemployed themselves.

Yet these same workers who call the principled ones “nuisances” know exactly what their own chances are. In the average auto plant today, for example, ex-foremen make up nearly one third of the work force. Although these ex-foremen know they’ll never get back on supervision, they still keep hoping and trying to make an impression on the bosses by their work. The same thing is true of a lot of other workers. They know that the speed-up is going to get worse and worse, but they continue to keep up with it rather than sacrifice a few days’ pay to show the company how much they resent it. Instead they take the easy way out and blame it on the union. It is true that



contract-wise the union has made all this possible. But at a certain point the union simply becomes an excuse, a pretext for not taking a stand on issues. The sell-out that has taken place in the contract between the union and the company does not change the fact of the corruption that has taken place in the workers.

These struggles among the old workers, which are creating such antagonisms among them, are really only delaying tactics on the part of the old herd. They do not touch the real question. It is automation which is the reality facing them and everybody in American society today. America today is headed towards an automated society, and it cannot be stopped by featherbedding, by refusal to work overtime, by sabotage, or by shortening the work week by a few hours. America today is rapidly reaching the point where, in order to defend the warfare state and the capitalist system, there will be automation on top of automation. The dilemma before the workers and the American people is: How can we have automation

and still earn our livings? It is not simply a question of retraining or changing from one form of work to another. For automation definitely eliminates the need for a vast number of workers, including skilled, semi-skilled, unskilled, and middle-class clerical workers.

It is quite obvious that the attitudes and relations to their work of the new strata of workers who are already deeply involved in automation, are different from those of the old workers. It is these new relations to their work which have already made it impossible for the union to organize these new workers or for the old herd of workers to establish any relation to the new workers. The old workers regard the new ones as close to management and as part and parcel of the process which is eliminating them. The union can only approach these new workers in terms of economic demands or job classifications. But their salaries are high enough so that they are not concerned about a few cents more an hour. They start at

salaries much higher than the old skilled workers ever dreamed of attaining. But they do not think like the old skilled workers in terms of job classifications. Not at all. Rather they welcome constant changes in production as a challenge to their ability, knowledge, and ingenuity. Automation to them is as fascinating as going to school and tackling new problems every day. This interest in their work also makes them quite unconscious of the effect that their work is having on the old workers. But there is more than that. These new workers are not like the old inventor-geniuses who were hired by the company only so that their brains could be picked (e.g. as Henry Ford hired George Washington Carver at the peak of his abilities). These new workers are part and parcel of the new process of production, and at the same time their ideas are so crucial to the direction of the work that they are inseparable from management and the organization of the work. In their attitude to work and in the process of their work they have invaded man-

agement to the point of actually controlling the flow of production itself. But at the same time, in much the same way as the semi-skilled workers of the CIO era failed to seize political control, these new workers are leaving the political direction of their work, the purposes for which it is intended, to the old management. And because they lack any experience of struggle, even in getting their jobs, it is unlikely that any initiative for political struggle will come from them. Yet they are the new work force coming into a position of strategic power in production at a time when all the social problems of American society are being posed.

Automation replaces men. This of course is nothing new. What is new is that now, unlike most earlier periods, the displaced men have nowhere to go. The farmers displaced by mechanization of the farms in the 20's could go to the cities and man the assembly lines. As for the work animals like the mule, they could just stop growing them. But automation displaces people, and you don't just stop growing peo-

ple even when they have been made expendable by the system. Under Stalin the kulaks and all those who didn't go along with the collectivization of agriculture were just killed off. Even then, if they had been ready to go along, Stalin could have used them. But in the United States, with automation coming in when industry has already reached the point that it can supply consumer demand, the question of what to do with the surplus people who are the expendables of automation becomes more and more critical every day.

Many liberals and Marxists say that they should be used to build schools and hospitals and be sent to foreign countries to aid in their development. But such a proposal has as its premise that this is a socialist society when it is in fact a capitalist society, and what motivates a capitalist society primarily is the return on its investment.

There is only a limited number of these old workers whom capitalism can continue to employ in pro-

duction at a pace killing enough to be profitable. The rest are like the refugees or displaced persons so familiar in recent world history. There is no way for capitalism to employ them profitably, yet it can't just kill them off. It must feed them rather than be fed by them. Growing in numbers all the time, these displaced persons have to be maintained, becoming a tremendous drain on the whole working population, and creating a growing antagonism between those who have jobs and those who do not. This antagonism in the population between those who have to be supported and those who have to support them is one of the inevitable antagonisms of capitalism. And it is this antagonism, brought to a climax by automation, which will create one of the deepest crises for capitalism in our age. In this crisis one section of the population will be pitted against another, not only the employed against the unemployed but those who propose that the unemployed be allowed to starve to death rather than continue as such a drain on the

public against those who cannot stand by and see society degenerate into such barbarism. On both sides there will be members of all strata of the population.

Thus automation not only poses the questions of poverty and employment and related economic questions. It brings into sharp focus that element which the Negroes always bring with them when they struggle for their rights. It makes the question social because it poses the relations of man to man.

As automation spreads, it will intensify the crises of capitalism and sharpen the conflicts among the various sections of the population, particularly between those working and those not working, those paying taxes and those not paying taxes. Out of this conflict will grow a counter-revolutionary movement made up of those from all social layers who resent the continued cost to them of maintaining these expendables but who are determined to maintain the system that creates and multiplies the number of expendables. This in turn will mobilize those who begin

by recognizing the right of these displaced persons to live, and from there are forced to struggle for a society in which there are no displaced persons.

Thus automation is that stage of production which carries the contradictions of capitalism to their furthest extreme, creating and sharpening inside capitalist society the conflicts, antagonisms, clashes between people that make for social progress and the inevitable struggle that goes with it.

The fact has to be faced. Automation is the greatest revolution that has taken place in human society since men stopped hunting and fishing and started to grow their own food. It is capable of displacing as many productive workers from the work force as have been brought into the work force since the invention of the automobile at the beginning of this century. (Today an estimated one out of every six American workers depends, directly or indirectly, on the auto industry for employment.) In fact, so devastating would be the immediate effects if automation



were introduced at one fell swoop that those who would appear to benefit most from it (the capitalists) are as afraid of its introduction as the workers threatened with displacement.

Up to now the Marxists have more or less gone along with the old herd of semi-skilled and skilled workers who have resisted automation, at the same time reassuring themselves that private capitalists themselves would not have sufficient capital to go all out for automation. What they have failed to recognize is that it is not private capital as such which is introducing automation. The great bulk of the capital invested in automation today comes from the government and is paid for by every member of the American population, whether he is a worker, a member of the middle class, or rich. This is all done in the name of research and defense, but, whatever it is called, the benefits are as great to the capitalists as if they had put out the capital themselves. Thus the capitalists have found a way to get around the high cost of

automation as well as the high cost of scrapping still productive machinery.

One of the major aims of the Kennedy administration is to encourage automation, by granting subsidies to companies who go full speed ahead on it, both directly and in the form of tax write-offs. Therefore, when workers fight the introduction of automation, they are not only taking on private capitalism but the federal government itself. Yet so great is the contradiction generated by automation that the government, while giving it such encouragement, must at the very same time set up a new committee to study what is going to happen to the millions of displaced workers.

There is continual talk of new training programs. Yet those making these suggestions know that training is not the answer. In the very period when individuals are being trained, new machinery is being introduced which eliminates the need for such training. Take, for example, the draftsman. With the old

methods the engineer used to present his ideas to a draftsman who would make a rough sketch of these ideas which would then be given to another draftsman to refine. A third draftsman then drew the final blueprint, incorporating in it the exact size, the appearance, and the correct fittings to the millionth of an inch. Today all that this same engineer has to do is talk his ideas into a tape recorder which plays into a computer and the ideas are transformed into a design; the design in turn is fed into a developer and, once developed, can be handed over to the work foreman for building. The three draftsmen have been eliminated from the work process, and only the engineer and the toolmaker remain, each having to know more than before about the other's job.

Marxists have continued to think of a mass of workers always remaining as the base of an industrialized society. They have never once faced the fact that capitalist society could develop to the point of not needing a mass of workers. But this is the dilemma

of our time in the United States, and as of now only for the United States. The question before Americans is whether to be for the technological revolutions of automation despite all the people who will be displaced, or to be opposed to this advance, sticking with the old workers who are resisting the new machinery, as workers have done traditionally since the invention of the spinning jenny.

When Marx was writing in the middle of the 19th century, he was dealing with the most advanced countries of his day. But even these countries were underdeveloped in the sense that the great bulk of the people were still engaged in farm work. A large part of the labor force was still needed to produce the foodstuffs for people to eat and the raw materials (e.g. cotton) for industry.

Today if you told the average worker in a big American city that he ought to go back to the farm, he would give you all kinds of arguments. The only reason why he might go back is to get away from the

Bomb. He wouldn't think of going back in order to make a contribution to society in the way of production. He knows enough about the food that is rotting in the warehouses and the taxes he has to pay to store it. He knows enough about the great change that has taken place in the technology of farm production so that farm work is no longer socially necessary for the great majority of people.

But as yet few people have been ready to face the fact that, with automation and cybernation, we are reaching the stage where work in the factory is also no longer going to be socially necessary for the great majority. It is easy to accept that a man should move from one form of labor to another form, but it is hard to accept that there will no longer be a mass demand for any labor. It is so taken for granted that the production of goods is man's fundamental role in society that, even when technology is making this unnecessary, most people from the politicians and economists down to the man in the street still try to dream

up schemes that will require a lot of people to play a material productive role.

Yet, unless the Bomb falls and throws what is left of mankind back to the stage of hunting and fishing, society can't go backward technologically. Once man has gone on from the stage of hunting and fishing to that of agriculture, it makes no sense for him to go back to hunting and fishing as a means of making his livelihood. If man no longer needs to drive a mule in order to live, you just can't make him drive a mule. Why then should people keep looking for work in order to justify their right to live if there is no longer a social and economic need for them to work?

Marx envisaged a long period of industrialization during which the number of workers would be constantly growing. He believed that in the course of the conflict between labor and capital in the productive process, a new force would be created with human values of organization, cooperation, and discipline, in sharp contrast with the individualism, competition,

and greed of the capitalists. This new force he called “socialized labor” and he said that it was the new society growing up within the old.

In this country during the 30’s Marx’s perspectives were realized to an astonishing degree in the organization of the CIO. The work force had grown in numbers to meet the needs of the mass industrial production, and now came its co-operation, organization, discipline, and revolt. True, this work force did not actually take over power from the capitalists, but in the crisis of the Depression the pressures it exerted compelled the capitalists to establish the Welfare State with many of the social benefits that Marx had advocated.

That was a generation ago. Today when automation and cybernation are shrinking rather than expanding the work force, many people still think in the same terms. They still assume that the majority of the population will be needed to produce material goods and that the production of such goods will still remain the

heart of society. They have not been able to face the fact that even if the workers took over the plants they would also be faced with the problem of what to do with themselves now that work is becoming socially unnecessary. They have not been able to face this fact because they have no clear idea of what people would do with themselves, what would be their human role, or how society would be organized when work is no longer at the heart of society.

I don't think Marx would have had any difficulty in facing this fact if he were living today. Marx saw more clearly than anybody that men's ideas are determined by the stage of production. However, Marx is dead and one cannot continue to quote him as an all-time solution for social problems brought on by the development of production. A new theory must be evolved and it is likely to meet as much opposition as Marx's has met.

FROM *The American Revolution:*  
*Pages from a Negro Worker's Notebook*





**THE WORRYING STATE OF THE  
ANTI-PRISON MOVEMENT**

*Ruth Wilson Gilmore* 2015



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After declining for three consecutive years, the US prison and jail population increased in 2013. The widely declared victory over mass incarceration was premature at best. Below I raise four areas of particular concern about the state of the anti-prison movement.

1. A tendency to cozy up to the right wing, as though a superficial overlap in viewpoint meant a unified structural analysis for action.

Nearly 40 years ago, Tony Platt and Paul Takagi (1977) identified as “new realists” the law-and-order intellectuals who purveyed across all media and disciplines the necessity of being hard on the (especially Black) working class. Today’s new “new realists”—

the correct name for the “emerging bipartisan consensus”—exude the same stench. However differently calibrated, the mainstream merger depends on shoddy analysis and historical amnesia—most notably the fact that bipartisan consensus *built* the prison-industrial complex (PIC). The PIC isn’t just the barred building, but the many ways in which un-freedom is enforced and continues to proliferate throughout urban and rural communities: injunction zones and intensive policing, felony jackets and outstanding warrants, as well as school expulsions and job exclusions. Racial justice and economic democracy demand different paths from the one the new “new realists” blazed. Their top-down technocratic tinkering with the system renovates and aggrandizes it for the next generation.

The left-liberal side of the bipartisan consensus co-opts vocabulary and rhetorical flourishes developed for different purposes by organizations engaged in bottom-up, antiracist struggle. Slogans such as

“education, not incarceration” willfully obscure the vital distinctions between the new “new realists” and the grassroots organizations whose work they distort. Unfortunately, many who point out the cynical appropriation of tactical principles or highlight underlying strategic differences find themselves accused of obstructionism or worse.

Even before the eponymous book appeared, grassroots organizations knew that “the revolution will not be funded” (Incite! Women of Color Against Violence, 2007). That said, organizations rightly decided to take available money and run in order to popularize constructively radical remedies for fundamental social problems. Not surprisingly, the very few sources that once funded innovative work have abandoned it and they now wrap system-reinforcing work in phrases lifted from the thought and creativity of left and abolition grassroots struggle. Indeed, foundations cut loose the very organizations that came together in the 1998 Critical Resistance confer-

ence and consolidated the contemporary anti-prison movement. As a consequence, understanding and energy have taken a detour into reform for a few, while there is no change for the many.

Why the withdrawal of resources? From the perspective of the deep-pocket new “new realists,” the organizations that built the movement over the past two decades are profoundly unrealistic: their politics are too radical, their grassroots constituents too unprofessional or too uneducated or too young or too formerly incarcerated, and their goals are too opposed to the status quo.

What is the status quo? Put simply, capitalism requires inequality and racism enshrines it. Thus, criminalization and mass incarceration are class war, as Platt and Takagi explained in 1977. Therefore, the struggle against group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death is waged in every milieu—environmental degradation, public-goods withdrawal, attacks on wages and unions, divide-and-conquer

tactics among precarious workers, war, etc. Police killings are the most dramatic events in a contemporary landscape thick with preventable, premature deaths.

Although it has become mildly mainstream to decry outrages against poor people of color, the new “new realists” achieve their dominance by defining the problem as narrowly as possible in order to produce solutions that on closer examination will change little.

2. A tendency to aim substantial rhetorical and organizational resources at the tiny role of private prison firms in the prison-industrial complex, while minimizing the fact that 92 percent of the vast money-sloshing public system is central to how capitalism’s racial inequality works.

The long-standing campaign against private prisons is based on the fictitious claim that revenues raked in from outsourced contracts explain the origin

and growth of mass incarceration. In any encounter about mass incarceration, live or on the Internet, print or video, sooner rather than later somebody will insist that to end racism in criminal justice the first step is to challenge the use of private prisons.

Let us look at the numbers. Private prisons hold about 8 percent of the prison population and a barely measurable number (5 percent) of those in jails. Overall, about 5 percent of the people locked up are doing time in private prisons. What kind of future will prison divestment campaigns produce if they pay no attention to the money that flows through and is extracted from the public prisons and jails, where 95 percent of inmates are held? Jurisdiction by jurisdiction, we can see that contracts come and go, without a corresponding change in the number or the demographic identity of people in custody. In addition, many contracts are not even held by private firms, but rather by municipalities to whom custody has been delegated by state corrections departments.



3. A tendency to pretend that systematic criminalization will rust and crumble if some of those caught in its iron grip are extricated under the aegis of relative innocence.

One of the most troubling moves by the new “new realists” is to insist on foregrounding the relatively innocent: the third-striker in for stealing pizza or people in prison on drug possession convictions. The danger of this approach should be clear: by campaigning for the relatively innocent, advocates reinforce the assumption that others are relatively or absolutely guilty and do not deserve political or policy intervention. For example, most campaigns to decrease sentences for nonviolent convictions simultaneously decrease pressure to revise—indeed often explicitly promise never to change—sentences for serious, violent, or sexual felonies. Such advocacy adds to the legitimization of mass incarceration and ignores how police and district attorneys produce serious or violent felony charges, indictments, and con-

victions. It helps to obscure the fact that categories such as “serious” or “violent” felonies are not natural or self-evident, and more important, that their use is part of a racial apparatus for determining “dangerousness.”

For example, campaigners for California’s Proposition 47 placed a widely touted “bipartisan” op-ed in the *Los Angeles Times*, coauthored by Newt Gingrich and B. Wayne Hughes Jr., in which the authors argued that “California has been overusing incarceration. Prisons are for people we are afraid of, but we have been filling them with many folks we are just mad at.”

Note the use of the word “afraid.” The new “new realists,” with their top-down reforms, are trying to determine who constitutes “we”; worse, they also reinforce a criminal justice system, ideology, and image bank that justified Darren Wilson’s grand jury testimony—just as it justified Bernard Goetz’s actions

three decades ago. #BlackLivesMatter is an absolute statement, watered down to #sometimes by the opportunistic relativism of the new “new realists.”

4. A tendency to virulently oppose critique from the Left, as though the work of thinking hard about how and what we do interferes with the work of reform.

Opportunists beguile audiences and divert attention and resources from people and organizations that have been fighting for decades to change the foundations on which mass incarceration has been built: structural racism, structural poverty, and capitalism devouring the planet. And they succeed in part because it has become unhip to subject the decisions, rhetoric, and goals of reform campaigns to any kind of thoughtful scrutiny. At stake is not only how we fight to win, but also how prepared we are for victories. *Prepare to win* means *be ready for the morning after*. If, for example, Proposition 47 actually re-

leases savings that can be spent by school districts, who can ensure that the money goes to real educational programs, and not to school cops, school discipline, and school exclusion programs?

Fight to win.





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